

Jamaican independence celebrated

Community marks 39 years of freedom at local ceremonies

BY ELAINE O'CONNOR
STAFF REPORTER

The weekend's Caribana festival meant that Caribbean culture was celebrated across the city, but for those with ties to Jamaica, so was national pride.

Jamaica marked its 39th year of independence yesterday and Emancipation Day last Wednesday, making it an important weekend for Jamaican Canadians to reflect on their homeland.

"In Canada, the fact that miles separate us doesn't mean that our hearts are not at home and we don't care about what's going on there. We do," said Valarie Steele, president of the Jamaican Canadian Association.

More than 100 people, including Jamaica's consul-general in Toronto, A. B. Stewart Stephenson, Toronto Deputy Mayor Case Ootes and MPP Alvin Curling (Scarborough North), gathered in the blazing heat to participate in a flag-raising ceremony at Nathan Phillips Square yesterday.

But although they sang Jamaica's national anthem, held miniature flags and heard strains of Bob Marley's "Get Up, Stand Up," it was perhaps the weather that truly reminded those gathered of Jamaica.

The only shade to be found at the event seemed to be cast by the memory of the gang violence in parts of Kingston, Jamaica, that has killed more than 30 people during July.

"The violence that is going on there is terrible," said Beryl Morrison, who came to Canada 34 years ago.

Morrison said she has come to the flag-raising ceremony every year to show pride in her heritage and her adopted country.

"It's important to know that we're still here and we still love it," she said.

Steele said she was so proud to be identified as Jamaican that she wore a Jamaican T-shirt constantly after she came to Toronto in 1971.

Ootes, reading from a statement from a vacationing Mayor Mel Lastman, told the crowd that it is a privilege to have such a strong Jamaican community in Toronto.

"The Jamaican community is an important part of the city's cultural mosaic," Ootes said.

"For sure, we have been a nation, a young nation, that has faced many struggles," said Consul-General Stephenson. "We had to fight for independence, and having gotten it we had to consolidate our gains and move for the development of our country and seek prosperity for our people."

"We've come a far way," agreed Curling, who called Jamaica "a land so small, yet . . . so massive in its principles and so determined in where it wants to go."



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

GIVING THANKS: Saniesha Lewis, 5, and her mother Lois Lewis take part in a service marking Jamaican independence yesterday at St. Michael and All Angels Church on St. Clair Ave. W.